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ABSTRACT

Having freshman English students at Pan American University in the Rio Grande valley of Texas focus on Mexican-American folklore themes for research papers has proved to be successful in motivating students and in activating their ethnic interests and cultural pride. Steps involved in preparing these research papers include choosing a topic which is not too broad, selecting bibliographic items (a minimum of ten sources--two periodicals, one reference book, two book-length studies, and five interviews), conducting interviews (for which students need to learn skill in handling direct and indirect quotes), and carrying out library research. Students may develop material in one of three ways or in a combination of these ways: cataloging variations of a belief or legend prevalent in the area, comparing a practice or belief current in Mexican-American culture to the same practice in Latin American countries, and comparing a folklore topic with similar practices in other areas throughout the world. (JM)

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Mexican-American Folklore: An Approach to the Research Paper

The freshman research project has always been, at least in my teaching, a clumsy beast to handle. Where does one begin to teach students that there is a reason for this creature, that hours of patient handling are required with the animal, that a student will be stronger for wrestling with it, and that, although it is submitted at roundup time in a clean and docile state, it will not necessarily be branded with a large "A"?

One of my more successful attempts to deal with the research project has been suggesting students do their papers on subjects of local folklore. I should pause here to say that although it's possible to find other ethnic groups with folkloric elements in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, it's obvious that the bulk of folk practices, legends, and beliefs is of Mexican origin or has to do in some way with our region's proximity to Mexico. And so, when I say local folklore, I will be talking mainly about Mexican and Mexican-American lore.

I usually begin the research project by suggesting to the class that our area is rich in folklore but poor in recorders of it. I tell them that they as college students can be a liaison between the world of beliefs and practices of the folk and the world of scholarly categorizing and preservation of these things.

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I point out that any freshman in the United States can write a paper on marijuana, abortion, or mental retardation--all subjects which have been worked to exhaustion--but very few can write with freshness and authority on mal de ojo, the Los Ebanos crossing, or medicinal herbs in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Usually, when I begin to talk about the possibilities for this subject, the class extrovert will volunteer a story from his or her family. The taboo broken, the stories pour out: "My grandmother says...," "I know this old man...," "When I was a child...."

So much for the motivation. There remains only the student who comes in private after class to ask incredulously, "You mean I could interview my grandmother in Reynosa and put what she believes in a research paper for English?"

"Yes," I reply, "with certain qualifications which I will spell out at the next class meeting."

And thus we are launched. The next step is to help them settle on a particular subject. When I first began teaching the folklore paper, I allowed students to write on common subjects such as curanderismo and mal de ojo. Later, I began to discourage these as single topics because I found they were much too broad for a freshman paper. As one student wrote in one of those early, unwieldy papers, "The number of beliefs surrounding the evil eye almost matches the number of those who believe in it." If the student really desires to write on curanderismo, I ask him or her to limit it to one particular kind such as the partera, or midwife. Likewise, if the student is interested in mal de ojo, the subject must

be limited to something such as mal de ojo cures effected by the use of eggs, or mal de ojo interpreted as electrical energy.

A further consideration in helping the student decide on a topic is the availability of materials. This is more important than ever if students are writing on folklore topics because the library resources are likely to be much more limited. The more I teach the folklore research paper, the better I become at guessing whether the student will find suitable library sources. Sometimes, though, it remains a shot in the dark and I try to warn the student that original research can just as well lead down dead-end streets as up thrilling secret passageways.

For the bibliography, I ask the student to use a minimum of ten sources for a 2,000-word paper, these being divided as far as possible in this way: two periodicals, one reference book, two book-length studies, and five interviews.

The student needs some help in interviewing unless he or she has had journalism in high school. I ask students to draw up lists of questions they plan to put to their informants and we sometimes discuss these before they go out. Students need to be reminded that what is often a "superstition" to them is a "belief" to their informants. I counsel them to think through very carefully beforehand the terms they will use in asking their questions. Otherwise, the informant may feel ridiculed or threatened and simply refuse to give any information.

The recorded interview is a good place to teach some skill in handling direct and indirect quotes. If I get to see the rough draft, I suggest revision for better balance if it appears there

are whole pages of verbatim reportage, or conversely, a terse, understated summary. Students frequently have trouble organizing the results of their interviews. They see the interviews as narratives and should be discouraged from recording them in their papers as a string of anecdotes. I ask them to categorize the viewpoints gained from the interviews according to the material they are working with and not according to the chronology of the interviews or the personalities of the informants.

Some students lack imagination in dealing with details surrounding the interviews. They need to be encouraged to report some details about the informants such as age, appearance, manner, and surroundings if these things have bearing on the information being gathered. Here is an example from a student paper of skillful handling of details: "According to Mrs. Antonia Negrete, who is a mother of ten, living in a rural area, home remedies and herbs that are found in her backyard are very helpful to her because with so many children, taking them to the doctor frequently will make her husband be working only for medical bills."

Unfortunately, the idea of interviewing people is taken by some students to mean a substitute for hours in the library. This notion must be quickly countered in an early class discussion by the instructor's emphasizing the folklore paper as a combination of field research and scholarly library work. Then the heat is on to prove that the student can, indeed, find something in the library about the subject. At this point, I would like to give some idea of the range of library materials that may be drawn on, at the same time

suggesting three possibilities for developing the student's chosen topic.

In one kind of paper, the student attempts to catalog the variations of a belief or legend prevalent in the area. The object is to show that such a belief does still exist, that it has many variants, and that it is propagated and altered even today. Here the student's research job is one of verification and classification. A variation on this approach is the discussion of a place with folkloric interest. One student did a paper of this type last year, gathering the various legends about an old cross on a hilltop at Santa Cruz in Starr County, Texas. One valuable source for this kind of paper is area newspapers. Students are often surprised to find in our college library the McAllen Monitor and the Brownsville Herald on microfilm. Small city libraries throughout the Rio Grande Valley contain rather good vertical files on local subjects, a definite argument for teaching the local folklore research paper at a commuter college. For any given region, there are usually general reference books useful for this approach--in our case such ones as Folk Life and Folklore of the Mexican Border by Adeline Dinger[1] and The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas by the Stambaughs.[2]

If the research paper is begun early enough in the semester, interlibrary loans prove fruitful.

A second approach might be a comparison of a practice or belief current in Mexican-American culture along the border to that same practice as it is or was interpreted in the interior of Mexico, in the other Central American countries, or in South America. I received an excellent paper on myths about the menses from a premedical student who compared the stories she uncovered from naive mountain girls near her home in Nicaragua with those she found here along the border. In this approach, students often exercise their bilingual skills by reading from sources in Spanish. Persons doing comparative research might also use such works as A Treasury of Mexican Folkways by Frances Toor,[3] and The Types of the Folktale in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Spanish South America.[4]

A third tack toward the folklore subject could be to take some local folklore topic and show how it corresponds to similar practices in other areas throughout the world. Mature students who want to do this kind of paper should be directed to work with the definitive Stith Thompson Motif-Index of Folk-Literature,[5] a work which attempts to classify the elements in folktales and legends according to kind and to give examples of variations from throughout the world. Some students have had good luck using Sir James George Frazer's The Golden Bough[6] for comparative analyses.

Sometimes a student will combine all three approaches in one paper. The success of this paper depends on the magnitude of the

chosen topic, the availability of information, and the organizational skills of the student.

Some general observations, now, about teaching the folklore paper. I feel it is unwise to make the writing of a folklore paper mandatory for an entire class. In our particular case, the library would be strained to serve thirty or sixty students, all doing research on local folklore. Also, some students will naturally have greater advantages over others in securing information--those who have relatives in Mexico, those who speak Spanish, and those who have available transportation to sources. And, regretfully, it is better not to make the folklore subject mandatory because a few students interpret such an assignment as an attempt to make them pay homage to a culture against which they are prejudiced. These students can be either Anglo-Americans with inbred suspicions, or they may be Mexican-Americans who, for a variety of reasons, wish to suppress their heritage. At any rate, I find it best not to make any assumptions about who will want to write a paper on Mexican-American folklore.

This brings up the subject of objectivity in handling the material. Frequently students are troubled about their own positions on the beliefs, superstitions, and practices of their families; this confusion is often reflected in their papers. Home at night to the established and workable values of a household rich in folklore, back the next morning to academia with its scientific approach to phenomena--it is no wonder that they write papers which begin in an objective way: "There are many legends here in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas about miracles worked by the Virgin of Guadalupe,"

and end subjectively: "The Virgin has helped me every time I have prayed to her."

In cases like this, I never argue with the student about the belief in question nor do I count off if the opinion is not mine. What I do is ask the writer to delete his or her own cause and effect theory from the paper, allowing the work to be a record of information gained and not an argument for the validity of the belief or practice.

I think it's especially important in the folklore paper to keep the viewpoint problem in proper perspective. Occasional slips in logic shouldn't be considered as serious as they might be in other subjects, simply because much folklore is not logical. Students--emotionally, culturally, familially involved in it as they are--are going to have problems with the objective viewpoint. I am not condoning papers based on personal feeling and emotion; I am condoning the instructor's not being horror-stricken when these elements find their way into a first draft.

One rather peculiar disadvantage of the folklore paper is often found in the student's inability to do any creative thinking on researching a subject, for the reason that he or she is too familiar with it. The student has lived so much a part of this folklore that there is a failure to recognize it for its investigative possibilities. Not all students weather this problem as well as Rosalinda Garcia did.

Rosalinda came to my office several days after we had begun work on the research paper, complaining that she had been unable to think of anything to write on. It was a dry day for me too, so I

relied on an old pedagogical stall: I asked what her hobbies were.

"Cooking and sewing," she replied.

I tried again. "Where do you live, Rosalinda?"

"In a little town named Los Ebanos on the river," she said. "It's really dead."

Now we were getting somewhere. I asked her to tell me about the hand-drawn ferry at Los Ebanos. She admitted she had never thought anything about it. It was part of her life, as common as a brother or a tortilla. I asked if she knew of anyone in Los Ebanos that could tell her some stories about the crossing. She thought maybe her mother knew someone. She went away, not excited, but at least committed to a paper on legends about the Los Ebanos crossing.

Several weeks passed. Papers were turned in and I was delighted to see that domesticity had taken a back seat to the Los Ebanos crossing. Here was a "cooking and sewing" personality discussing confidently the legends of Los Ebanos springing from events like Zachary Taylor's invasion of Mexico from there in 1846 or the recoveryof 500 head of cattle stolen from Richard King in 1874.

I'm very glad I happened to ask Rosalinda that day where she lived. As a result of that paper, I think she is a little prouder of being Rosalinda Garcia of Los Ebanos, Texas. I saw Rosalinda the other day--appropriately enough at the card catalogue in the library. She told me she was a senior. She looked as though she'd never gotten back to cooking and sewing.

Incidentally, a glance at Rosalinda's bibliography reveals that a paper done on a local subject does not preclude a good workout in the library. Her list includes a pamphlet from the

centennial celebration of the organization of Hidalgo County, Tip-O-Texas magazine, Carrol Norquest's book on Rio Grande wetbacks, The Stambaughs' history of the Lower Rio Grande, the Texas Forest Service's Famous Trees of Texas, several columns by Frank X. Tolbert in the Dallas News, and Walter Prescott Webb's history of the Texas Rangers.

Closely related to the problem of being too deep in the cultural forest to recognize the fruitful trees is the one of lack of imagination. I have already touched on this in connection with the interview but I should like to say just a little more about it as it concerns the whole subject of folklore. Folklore research requires a certain amount of lust after the facts, a derring-do, some vision of what might be out there awaiting record and interpretation. The first-handedness of it all scares the prosaic-minded student. Some students, like Reynaldo, never quite get the hang of it.

Reynaldo needed a topic so I suggested he do one on the ojo de venado, or deer's eye. Two weeks later he showed up saying, "I've got it." Thinking he meant he had his paper written, I complimented him for having it in early. "No," he said, "I don't have the paper written; I mean I've got an ojo de venado," and with that, he fished it from his pocket and laid it in my hand.

"There's nothing to tell about it," he said forlornly. "It's just a good luck charm." No amount of prodding on my part could make Reynaldo see the ojo de venado as anything but an amulet.

- suggested another subject or two but he was a blank on these as well. Maybe Reynaldo could not have settled on any subject in the wide world for a research paper, but I'm inclined to think

that my suggestion that the ojo de venado could be written about threw him into a state of wonderment over the sanity of English teachers.

There are two possible aids I know of for eager but unimaginative folklorists. One is a thorough class discussion of the range of folklore subjects--from homeopathic magic of the bruja to the use of the folk remedy, aloe vera, for treating burn patients at sophisticated medical installations around the country. The other is an examination, preferably by use of the opaque projector, of an "A" paper based on a folklore subject.

What are the humanistic implications of the research paper written on a folklore theme? It has been my observation that folklore papers are easier on the student than papers dealing with current issues of Mexican-American life, papers for instance, on the United Farm Workers, bilingual education, or the problems of the migrant worker. I think this is because it is difficult for the freshman, any freshman, to write objectively in areas where he or she has high personal stakes. Folklore as a theme subject retains all the ethnic interest and cultural pride that social issues carry but without the baggage of unhappy experiences or difficult emotions to work through.

I think of the folklore paper as an instrument of affirmation. It has been a particularly good thing for students who are straddling two worlds, unable to decide on which foot to put their weight. It gives them a respectable, meaningful, moderate way to say they are proud of themselves and their past. It gives them a chance to make a definite contribution to the preservation of the fabric of

a rich culture. It is, in the end, a way to integrate living and learning.

NOTES

[1]Folk Life and Folklore of the Mexican Border (Edinburg, Texas: Hidalgo County Historical Museum, 1972).

[2]J. Lee Stambaugh and Lillian J. Stambaugh, The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas (Austin, Texas: Jenkins, San Felipe Press, 1974).

[3]A Treasury of Mexican Folkways (New York: Crown, 1947).

[4]Terrence Leslie Hansen, The Types of the Folktale in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Spanish South America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

[5]Motif-Index of Folk-'iterature (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1955-58).

[6]The Golden Bough, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1951).